

**THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF NORTH CAROLINA
ASHEVILLE DIVISION
CRIMINAL CASE NO. 1:18-cr-00074-MR-WCM-2**

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Plaintiff,

vs.

TERRELL CARLIN THOMAS,

Defendant.

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ORDER

THIS MATTER is before the Court on the Defendant's letter, which the Court construes as a motion for compassionate release or for release to home confinement [Doc. 59].

The Defendant seeks a compassionate release pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Defendant asserts that he tested positive for COVID-19 on July 7, 2020, and that he is currently in quarantine. Alternatively, he requests a release to home confinement. [See Doc. 59].

Section 3582(c)(1)(A), as amended by The First Step Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-391, 132 Stat. 5194, 5239 (Dec. 21, 2018), permits a defendant to seek a modification of her sentence for "extraordinary and compelling reasons," if the defendant has "fully exhausted all administrative rights to

appeal a failure of the Bureau of Prisons to bring a motion on the defendant's behalf or the lapse of 30 days from the receipt of such a request by the warden of the defendant's facility, whichever is earlier." 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A). By its plain language, § 3582(c)(1)(A) makes clear that a defendant must first exhaust all administrative remedies or wait thirty days after submitting a request for release from the warden before filing a motion for a sentence reduction. Further, the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit has held that a district court lacks the authority to modify a sentence except in the narrow circumstances and procedures set forth in § 3582. See United States v. Goodwyn, 596 F.3d 233, 235 (4th Cir. 2010).¹

While some courts have waived the exhaustion requirement for compassionate release motions in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, see United States v. Feiling, No. 3:19cr112 (DJN), 2020 WL 1821457, at *4 (E.D. Va. Apr. 10, 2020) (collecting cases), other courts have been reluctant to

¹ The Fourth Circuit has not yet ruled on whether the exhaustion requirements in § 3582(c)(1)(A) are jurisdictional or merely a claims-processing rule. This Court, however, need not decide that issue in order to resolve the present motion. Either way, the Defendant must exhaust his administrative remedies as defined in § 3582(c)(1)(A) before filing a motion for compassionate release in this Court. See Ross v. Blake, 136 S. Ct. 1850, 1857 (2016) (finding that "mandatory exhaustion statutes . . . establish mandatory exhaustion regimes, foreclosing judicial discretion"); United States v. Williams, No. CR JKB-15-0646, 2020 WL 1506222, at *1 (D. Md. Mar. 30, 2020) (denying motion for reduction of sentence because defendant failed to exhaust his administrative remedies, but declining to decide whether exhaustion requirement is jurisdictional).

grant such waivers. For example, the Third Circuit in United States v. Raia held that a prisoner's failure to exhaust all administrative remedies set forth in § 3582(c)(1)(A) warranted the denial of his motion for compassionate release. 954 F.3d 594, 597 (3d Cir. 2020). In so holding, the Third Circuit stated that it did not intend to minimize the risks that COVID-19 poses to the health of federal inmates. However, the Court noted, "the mere existence of COVID-19 in society and the possibility that it may spread to a particular prison alone cannot independently justify compassionate release, especially considering the BOP's statutory role, and its extensive professional efforts to curtail the virus's spread." Id.² The Court went on to state as follows:

Given BOP's shared desire for a safe and healthy prison environment, we conclude that strict compliance with § 3582(c)(1)(A)'s exhaustion requirement takes on added—and critical—importance. And given the Attorney General's directive that BOP prioritize the use of its various statutory authorities to grant home confinement for inmates seeking transfer in connection with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we anticipate that the statutory requirement will be speedily dispatched in cases like this one.

²Citing Federal Bureau of Prisons, COVID-19 Action Plan (Mar. 13, 2020, 3:09 PM), https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200313_covid19.jsp.

Id. (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). Other courts, including district courts within the Fourth Circuit, have followed Raia's example and continued to require the full exhaustion of administrative remedies before considering motions for compassionate release related to the COVID-19 pandemic. See United States v. Smith, No. 3:16-cr-48 (MPS), 2020 WL 1903160, at *3 (D. Conn. Apr. 17, 2020); United States v. Meron, No. 2:18-cr-0209-KJM, 2020 WL 1873900, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Apr. 15, 2020); United States v. Hembry, No. 12-cr-00119-SI-1, 2020 WL 1821930, at *2 (N.D. Cal. Apr. 10, 2020); Feiling, 2020 WL 1821457, at *5; United States v. Gillis, No. 14-cr-00712 SJO (1), 2020 WL 1846792, at *2 (C.D. Cal. Apr. 9, 2020); United States v. Perry, No. 18-cr-00480-PAB, 2020 WL 1676773, at *1 (D. Colo. Apr. 3, 2020); United States v. Carver, -- F. Supp. 3d --, 2020 WL 1604968, at *1 (E.D. Wash. Apr. 1, 2020); United States v. Clark, No. 17-85-SDD-RLB, 2020 WL 1557397, at *3 (M.D. La. Apr. 1, 2020); United States v. Oliver, No. JKB-16-0485, 2020 WL 1505899, at *1 (D. Md. Mar. 30, 2020); United States v. Zywotko, No. 2:19-cr-113-FtM-60NPM, 2020 WL 1492900, at *1 (M.D. Fla. Mar. 27, 2020); United States v. Eberhart, No. 13-cr-00313-PJH-1, 2020 WL 1450745, at *2 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 25, 2020); United States v. Cohen, No. 19cr602 (WHP), 2020 WL 1428778, at *1 (S.D.N.Y. Mar. 24,

2020); United States v. Gileno, No. 3:19-cr-161-(VAB)-1, 2020 WL 1307108, at *3 (D. Conn. Mar. 19, 2020). The Court agrees with Raia and the cases cited above and therefore joins these courts in holding that the mere existence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Defendant's potential susceptibility to that illness does not render the exhaustion of administrative remedies futile.³

Here, the Defendant does not assert that he has submitted a request for compassionate release to the warden of his Bureau of Prisons facility or that he has otherwise exhausted his administrative remedies with respect to that request. As such, the Court cannot grant the requested relief. Accordingly, the Defendant's motion for a sentence reduction under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) is denied without prejudice.

The Defendant alternatively moves the Court to order his release to home confinement. [Doc. 59]. This request, however, must also be denied. The discretion to release a prisoner to home confinement lies solely with the Attorney General. See 18 U.S.C. § 3624(c)(2); 34 U.S.C. § 60541(g). The legislation recently passed by Congress to address the COVID-19 pandemic


³ This is especially true where, as here, the Defendant reports already having contracted the virus and does not indicate that he is suffering any serious complications therefrom.

does not alter this. See CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136, 134 Stat 281, 516 (2020) (“During the covered emergency period, if *the Attorney General* finds that emergency conditions will materially affect the functioning of the Bureau [of Prisons], the *Director of the Bureau* may lengthen the maximum amount of time for which *the Director* is authorized to place a prisoner in home confinement under the first sentence of section 3624(c)(2) of title 18, United States Code, as *the Director determines appropriate.*”) (emphasis added). As such, this Court lacks the authority to order the Defendant’s release. Deffenbaugh v. Sullivan, No. 5:19-HC-2049-FL, 2019 WL 1779573, at *1 (E.D.N.C. Apr. 23, 2019); United States v. Overcash, No. 3:15-CR-263-FDW-1, 2019 WL 1472104, at *3 (W.D.N.C. Apr. 3, 2019) (noting that there is “no provision for judicial review of the BOP’s and Attorney General’s decision with regards to a request for home detention under § 60541(g)”); United States v. Curry, No. 6:06-082-DCR, 2019 WL 508067, at *1 (E.D. Ky. Feb. 8, 2019) (“Because the First Step Act gives the *Attorney General* the discretion to determine if and when home confinement is appropriate, this Court does not have the authority to grant the requested relief.”) (emphasis in original). For these reasons, the Defendant’s request for a release to home detention is denied.

IT IS, THEREFORE, ORDERED that the Defendant's letter, which the Court construes as a motion for a reduction in sentence or release to home confinement [Doc. 59], is **DENIED**. The denial of the Defendant's request for compassionate release is **WITHOUT PREJUDICE** to refiling after the Defendant has fully exhausted all administrative rights to appeal a failure of the Bureau of Prisons to bring a motion on the Defendant's behalf or the lapse of 30 days from the receipt of such a request by the warden of the Defendant's facility, whichever is earlier.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Signed: August 24, 2020



Martin Reidinger
Chief United States District Judge

